

ON THE BRINK

‘Proposed’ Sunabeda Tiger Reserve

GROUND ZERO REPORT-Feb 2019



An appeal to immediately notify the pending proposal of Tiger Reserve

by



In early decades of 20th century Rev. Emil Menzel described the mountains of Nuapada district (Khariar Zamindari) as –deep blue colour that speaks of friendliness and sincerity: they are not mountains like Himalayas which overawe you with tremendous mass, nor are they hungry looking mountains like the Ozarka, nor business-like mountains with even tops like the Appalachians, nor symbols of barrenness like the Palestinian hills. They are romantic mountains just high enough to make you feel cosy in their lap, with just forest enough to soften them and rock enough to give them character and save them from being merely sentimental. The outline curves by the hills, without breaking the cosy circle are so graceful and varied that they remind you of the Greek's contribution to art.

“The forest-clad hills lend an inward touch to the romance of the scene in the reminder that the beautiful spotted deer has chosen them to be its home, and a dozen tigers roam free”

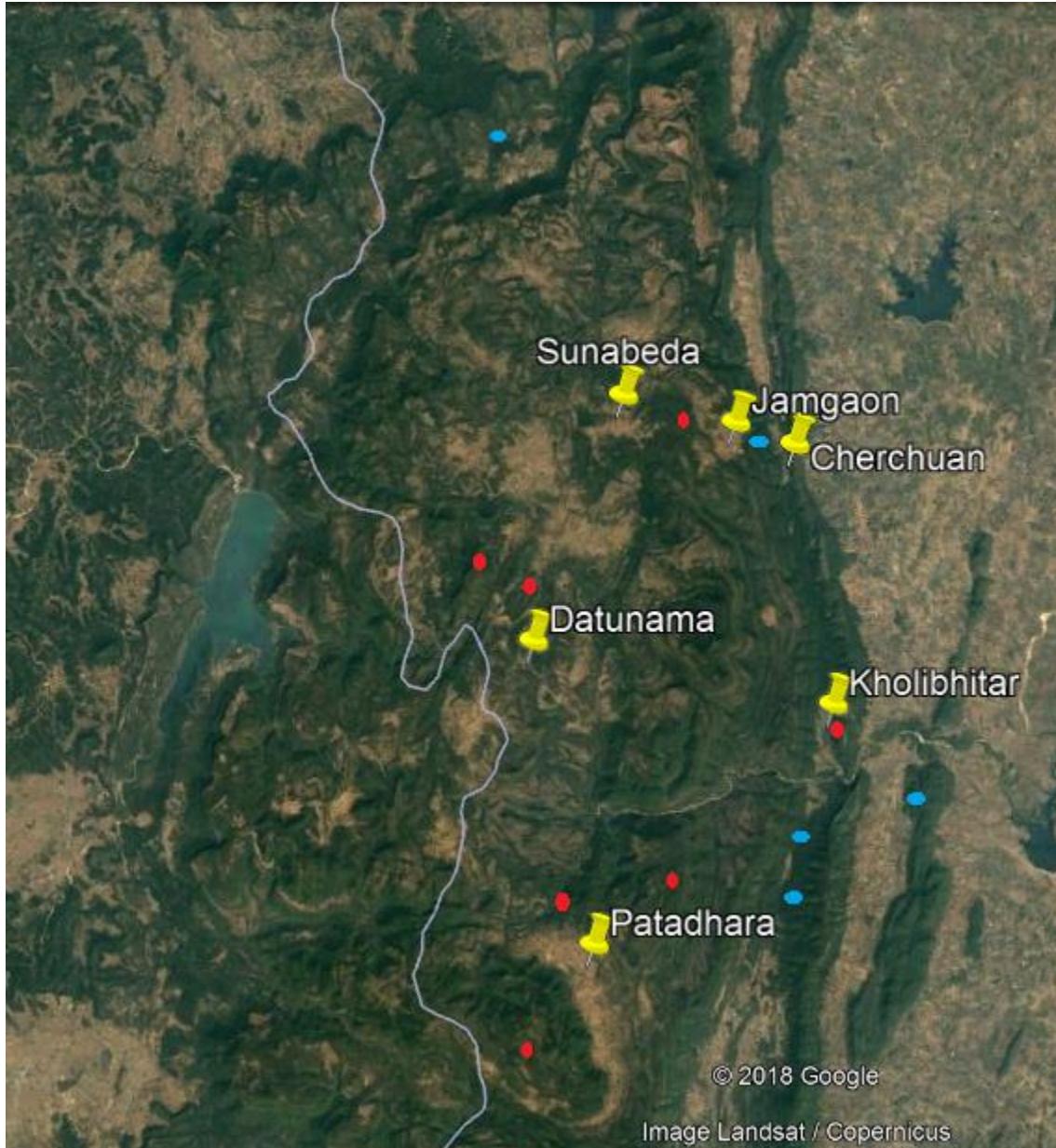
Melick E.M. —The Evangelical Synod in India, referred in *Orissa District Gazetteers Kalahandi*



A waterbody near Barkot....beyond are the blue hills of Sunabeda

Presence of Tigers and Leopards

During our study period, we were in constant look out for evidences supporting the presence of big cats in Sunabeda region. Based on scat and pugmark evidence, following are the observations:



Red dots: RBT presence Blue dots: Leopard presence

We came across evidence of presence of Tigers in multiple locations. Conversations with local villagers revealed that they were confined mainly to southern and central half between Patadhara valley and Datunama. We were able to photograph scat of Tiger on the road to Datunama. Scat samples were present on multiple points on that stretch between Sunabeda and Datunama which supports the probability of regular movement of the tiger in that area.



Tiger scat near Datunama

On another occasion we saw scat remains of a tiger with goat fur near Jamgaon village on the road towards Sunabeda. It's a pretty healthy sign as well as scary. Healthy because this probable resident Tiger is present in the eastern fringe of proposed tiger reserve which is relatively less dense. Scary, because proximity to villages means threat to livestock and it may get poisoned. There is a high possibility that because of scarcity of herbivore prey base in the region, they are forced to lift domestic cattle.



Pugmark of a leopard
near Jamgaon



Scat remains of a goat kill by a RBT near Jamgaon



Tiger scat near Datunama

Interviews with villagers in Kholibhitar and Chuipani have revealed that cattle kills are common in the locality. On most of the occasions cattle kills are not located by villagers as they are killed deep inside the jungles.

Leopards are common across. We came across Leopard signs on multiple places. Very commonly being seen in Jamgaon area behind the CRPF camp. Leopard killing livestock is also a common phenomenon reinforcing the fact that herbivore prey base is very less. During interviews, villagers at multiple locations talked of direct sighting of leopards. Cattle kills are very common in the northern fringe near Lodra as well as towards southern boundary of Khariar Division towards Bhainsadani region.

Historically there has always been movement of tigers between Sunabeda and Sitanadi-Udanti region and presently also there is a very high possibility of these transient tigers moving between these forests. This is in addition to population of resident tigers.

Unconfirmed reports say that there is a resident breeding tigress with cubs that is present between Patadhara valley and Datunama. Though we didn't come across evidence of presence of cubs or multiple tigers at any common point, we have a strong inclination in believing this fact that there is presence of healthy breeding tigers in the region, of course under tremendous threat and pressure as described briefly in subsequent notes.

A dwindling prey base: enough reasons to worry

Hundreds of miles covered without any direct sighting of a single Wild boar, gaur, spotted deer, sambar, barking deer etc. Hanuman langur at some places is what we had to contend with. Mostly they have gone nocturnal owing to huge disturbance caused by villagers, grazers and poaching which has been discussed in the following notes. Dung heaps of Nilgai at couple of places was a big hope. We heard of the presence of a single Nilgai which roams about near Soseng village and is almost domesticated as it grazes along with domestic cattle. Sunabeda is perhaps the only place left in Odisha which is now reporting Nilgai. They were in plenty earlier in the Sunabeda plateau but poaching has taken a toll over the years. Today they have also gone nocturnal. These all factors have resulted in dwindling big cat population. Due to scarcity of prey, cattle kills will go up in coming days and subsequently complete eradication of the big cats.



A Nilgai that's seen along with cattle herds near Soseng

Lost case of Wild Buffalo and Barasingha

Forests around Sunabeda used to have good numbers of Wild Buffalos till 1960s. Hunting, cattle borne disease and habitat destruction led to extinction of Wild Buffalo in the region. Unconfirmed and occasional movement of individuals are reported sometime near Sitanadi but that's just a speculation. With the efforts of Chhattisgarh government, there is some chance that we could get back wild buffaloes in forests of Indravati and Sitanadi-Udanti but situation continues to be precarious.

Same is the case of hardground Barasingha which were once seen on the plateaus till 1950s and they just vanished, wild buffaloes way. Today they are extinct and there is no chance of revival.

Will we allow same to happen to Tigers of Sunabeda is a question we need to ask? Answer we know, but efforts are yet to be seen on ground.



A trophy of Wild Buffalo in Khariar palace....an ugly reminder of what we have lost

Poaching: the biggest threat

While writing about this note, we are trembling. That's the ground reality.

Who will save our wilderness? Who all are involved or rather who all are not involved? What is the frequency? What is the impact? How deep rooted? What is the way out? Questions galore about poaching scenario without much answers!

Here is what we have heard from the multiple conversations that we had on this with villagers. There are dealers who come to Khariar, Nuapada and Bhawanipatna from Raipur. They have their informers all across the villages of the plateau and also have some local habitual accomplices. Once there is a cattle kill, the informer passes on information to local poachers who try to make a deal with the bigger dealers based at Raipur or Kolkata. They then pay the villager to poison the carcass. As soon as Leopard or Tiger gets killed because of poisoning, the local poachers arrive at the site to skin it. Then the hide is either kept with the villager or hidden in forests as deal is made. Once deal is finalized, the hide is smuggled swiftly. While we don't have any evidence for involvement, there are eyebrows raised at times on some of the local ground staff being aware about the transaction as there is a share involved. How far it is true, a detailed investigation by the competent authorities in true spirit will be helpful.

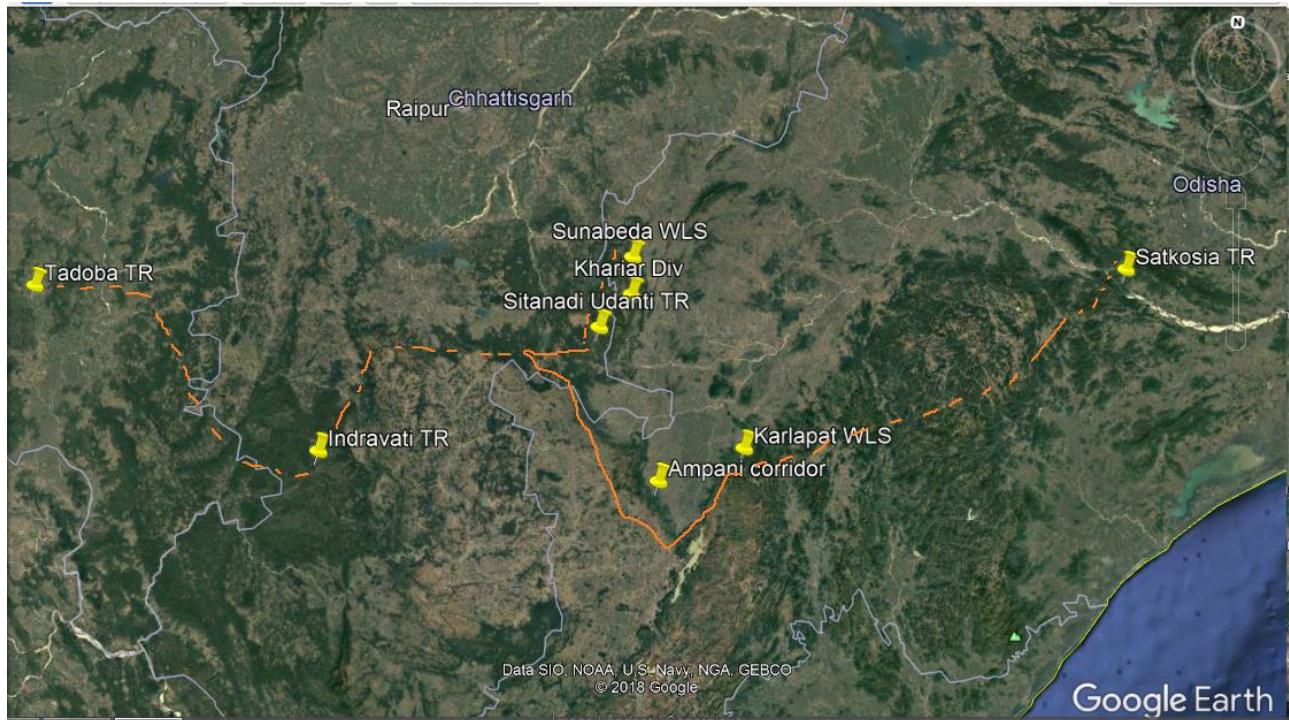
Beyond the problem of a state: It's rightly about tiger landscape

It's very difficult to differentiate between forests of Odisha and Chhattisgarh as soon as one scans through the forested plateau of Sunabeda. One gets to cross the inter-state boundary between Odisha and Chhattisgarh at multiple points. Hence tiger population of Sunabeda cannot be protected or counted in isolation. A strong coordination between the forest departments of both the states in tiger monitoring and protection is needed. Tiger don't identify the borders and that should be our approach. Any loss of tiger should not be projected through an ideology where in ball is passed on to next one's court. For example seizure of any tiger hide or tracing of any tiger loss should be counted as a loss to this fragile habitat that's dying day by day. One of the way's to monitor the progress of this tiger habitat is to bucket it as Eastern-Central India landscape unlike the Central Indian landscape categorization that exists as per NTCA. More accountability of the region will be fixed this way. During our scanning of the area, most of the tiger movements were seen in the border region and hence inter-state coordination and information sharing is important.

Saving fragile corridors: A burning priority

Sunabeda is contiguous with Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve which has connectivity to Indravati Tiger Reserve. There is an important connectivity between Sunabeda and the central Odisha landscape. This narrow corridor is the Ampani corridor, a narrow fragmented forest stretch spread across districts of Nabrangpur and Kalahandi .Historically this stretch has been used by tigers to move between Udanti Sitanadi and down to forests of Kalahandi. Few decades back it was very usual for the travellers on this road to come across the sight of tigers and leopards crossing the road. Those cases are far and few in the present day. Once we realize the importance of these fragile corridor and start protecting it, central Odisha will start getting tigers naturally. With increasing number of tigers in the central India especially Tadoba

region, there would be more number of cases of transient tigers moving out in search of new habitat. Since Indravati TR is also connected by fragile corridors with Tadoba, there is a high chance Indravati TR would start getting these dispersing tigers. Indravati TR , Udanti-Sitanadi are connected with forests of Odisha through Ampani corridor. Occasional reporting of tigers in Karlapat and forests around it is might be a result of dispersing tigers from central India. Odisha needs to be prepared for these dispersing tigers. It's high time forests of Kundei, Timanpur, Chandahandi, Maidalpur, Dalbera, Kuhuri etc in Nabrangpur get to know their importance. Unfortunately they are not on priority list for us.



The Tiger connectivity from Central India to Odisha

In 2016 , news of dead RBT in the forests of Lathor in Balangir district was reported. It was a prime adult tiger without any visible external injury. Unfortunately none of our staff in the ranges around Lathor reported its presence prior to death. We suspect this tiger was one from Sunabeda region which had dispersed from the plateau. Historically the forests of Chakadongar between Khariar and Komana in Nuapada district has been a corridor for movement of tigers between Sunabeda and Balangir. Today it stands battered under extreme human pressure and widening of roads, construction of nearby dams etc. We need to start protecting the Chakadongar area if Balangir needs to get back its tigers. Measures to widen the corridor needs to be taken urgently and further damage on it needs to be curtailed.

These corridors are actually rays of hopes for the non- tiger forests.



The dead Tiger in the forests of Balangir (Photo credit: FB/S Bhoi)

Unmanned posts & devastated infrastructure: a scary sight

This is the most painful section to write about. Everywhere the sight of razed beat houses, annihilated camps and unmanned check posts greet you as if the place is haunted and doomed. There is almost zero monitoring. Presence of staff inside the sanctuary is mainly for the supervision of road repairing or similar sort of activities. There is no sight of foot patrolling that we have come across over last 2 years. Occasional visit of Range officer and forester in plain clothes to villages is all that forest department's connect with villagers is confined to. Rarely DFOs of Khariar and Nuapada visit the sanctuary. Some activity in terms of tiger census has been carried out but there is hardly any census work carried out in the real action zone deep inside forests.

We are fully cognizant that the forests are still unsafe because of presence of Naxalites. We know that there is regular movement of red rebels that's happening in the region. Few years back situation was worse when the naxalite movement was at its peak in the plateau. With the setting up of CRPF camps at Jamgaon, Soseng and Barkote things have been somewhat brought back to normalcy. Currently, forest department staffs have not returned back to their regular posts inside the sanctuary. The DFO and RCCF have to figure out the way to boost the morale of staff and encourage them to start having touch points with villagers. At

least day patrolling in some of the fringe areas, building back the intelligence network and manning the main entry point at Cherchuan is what has to begin urgently. If DFO Nuapada does not visit the sanctuary and DFO Khariar does not move in the forests of Khariar area every week then let us not expect the staff on ground to feel safe and start doing duty diligently. It will be highly unfair on part of us to criticize only the ground staff. Exemplifying work by the leaders is the need of the hour.





Unmanned checkposts: a common sight



Devastated infrastructure

Villagers can be the real saviors: EDC and VSS are the solutions

Since there is no presence of our staff inside the sanctuary, it's highly recommended that we partner with the local community in conserving Sunabeda. EDC and VSS in sanctuary and Khariar forest division are the only solutions right now incase staff are feeling unsafe to work in the forests. Regular funding for these community participation initiatives will go a long way in developing intelligence network on probable timber mafias and poaching; help prevent forest fire in summers, creating a better level of trust that's in ramshackle currently and more importantly get help & cooperation from the villagers in cases of adversity.



Villagers during discussion at Kholibhitar

Social Welfare and Local infrastructure: Build back trust

Spending money on welfare measures should be a big priority if Sunabeda needs to be saved. This is not about segregating the scope of work between forest department and other district entities. We have to find out mechanism of using some of the below mentioned levers in building back the trust of villagers and taking them on forest department's side. If not front ending, at least department should find ways and means to influence the local district authority in carrying out some of the initiatives.

- a) **Construction of roads:** This is one of the major pain points for the villagers and fuels the anti-forest dept agitations. We are not recommending the construction of roads across the sanctuary but at least the road that connects Sunabeda GP with Jamgaon and Cherchuan has to be constructed on war footing basis and department should try to take the credit of it. What angers the local community is that every time there is a road that is constructed either under PMGSY or under any other government scheme, FD would stop the work citing forest and wildlife rules. Instances of raw materials having been unloaded near the construction site, machinery brought in by the contractor and then, forest department arriving at the scene and halting works have come to our notice, ruefully narrated by villagers. Optically FD stands out as the villain. Why not stop all this at the very initial stages when materials and machinery are brought inside the sanctuary by the contractors? There is a view gaining ground that, this stoppage of work is being done with a purpose of harassing the local community. Government '108' Ambulance most of the times declines to come up to the plateau citing various reasons, but everyone knows that it's the treacherous un-motorable roads which is why they don't come for service.
- b) **Solar lights:** Since power is not available inside the sanctuary despite the uncharged transmission lines that have been put till Sunabeda, villagers face a lot of problem. Until and unless we have solar sub-stations set up in each and every village, the demand for transmission lines will be there across the sanctuary posing a great threat to wildlife and also helping the poachers in killing of wild animals. There are some provisions made in villages like Kholibhitar, Chupani etc but some of the big villages need urgent attention. Some of the villages have been provided with Solar street lights which are non functional now owing to old unserviceable batteries etc. A long term plan in this regard is the need of the hour.
- c) **Healthcare:** The Health camps, vaccination, distribution of iron tablets for kids can be taken up by the forest department in coordination with district health department. Non availability of doctors in the whole plateau barring occasional visits in form of health camps has resulted in a flourishing business of local uncertified quacks who visit different villages with boxes of medicines and saline bottles. They charge exorbitantly for the medicines in the wake of remoteness of the place. Periodic medical camps can be conducted in different remote villages which will result in creation of goodwill for the department. Most of the kids are malnourished to the extreme owing to the less usage of vegetables in the food. Distribution of vitamin and iron tablets through the health department can be taken up.
- d) **Education:** Schools are few and far and students who have passed 12th can be counted on tip of finger. Most of the kids drop out of the school owing to absence of higher secondary schools. There are few cases of kids who are studying in KISS, Bhubaneswar and nearby Adarsh schools at Barkot, Keshrajpur etc. Until and unless current generation is educated and employed, hunting and timber trading menace cannot be curbed. As an organization, TCF has done multiple awareness and sensitizations sessions with kids in different schools on wildlife awareness because we believe kids are the future torch bearers of tiger conservation movement. They can go and influence their parents back home if at all, they are involved illegal timber cutting.

- e) **Clean drinking water:** This remains one of the major problems across all villages. Sources of clean drinking water are far and few. There is a high content of fluoride in the ground water which results in health related issues including flurosis. To begin with, any help on this front by the department will be greatly appreciated for sure by the local community.
- f) **Distribution of LPG:** Ujwala scheme of government can be one of the levers for distribution of domestic gases in some of the big villages. This will reduce the dependency on fuel wood and hence less dependency on the forests of the region. Mostly people collect the firewood from the forest which is leading to destruction of habitat for animals.
- g) **Prophylactic inoculation of village cattle:** Cattle borne diseases play a great drag factor for wild ungulates, especially when their numbers have crashed. This can be done with the help of District Veterinary and AH Department.

Ground Flora and Overgrazing: The reason of abysmally low prey density

Overgrazing, historically, has been the biggest headache for Sunabeda. There is absolutely destruction of ground flora because of overgrazing over the years. Graziers from as far as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh arrive here on the onset of monsoon with hundreds and sometimes thousands of lambs and goats and camp inside the sanctuary area. They come in as whole family and set up pens at multiple locations. Most of the times, they are also accompanied by Camels. Because of this uncontrolled grazing, there is hardly anything left for the local herbivore population. It's not only ground flora that gets affected, they have sickles attached to long sticks which is used for lopping of many of the trees with green leaves so that, falling branches with fresh leaves can be devoured by the livestock. Such disturbance and transfer of cattle borne diseases like foot and mouth disease, rinder-pest to the wild animals is very degrading in terms of prey animals. In fact, local extinction of wild buffalo and Barasingha could be attributed to this scourge. There have been instances when some of the carcasses have been poisoned by these gypsy graziers with a purpose to kill the Tiger/Leopard. Irony of the situation is such that local villagers also have been vehemently opposing these graziers but the forest department has not been active on stopping this menace. In the past, agitations have also happened by local community against allowing of the graziers to camp inside the forest.

Tourism:

The whole landscape provides a plethora of scenic spots which have huge potential to become tourist hub. Of course present situation is not conducive. Picturesque waterfalls like Beniadhus, Kharaldhus, Godhus and many more are scattered throughout the whole landscape. With unique rock formations and spectacular cliffs and gorges adjoining the waterfalls, the whole vista is a great sight for the onlookers. Maraguda valley on the northern boundary of the Sanctuary is a great site of historical heritage and still remains of the fort constructed by Chauhan dynasty can be seen over there. This is adjoining the Raitalsagar, a water body which is a great place to see winter migratory birds. Kapatdhar on the eastern boundary again is a breathtaking landscape and tourist place absolutely untapped and unpublicized. Topaz

green waters of Ghodanala cuts through the rocky cliff of Gurudongar. Maa Sunadei temple on top of plateau is where you have the annual jatra. Manikgarh at Maraguda, Jumlagarh near Beniadhus are some of the last remains of the forts built by rulers of Khariar. Apart from all this, Ranimuhas Kholigan, Patalganga, Upkaganga etc are some of the other points of attraction in the landscape which has a huge potential to be developed as a major eco tourism hub in line with the tourism priorities of current government. Already there were efforts to promote eco tourism by forest department between 2005-07 and some constructions that happened including creation of eco-tourism complexes at Maraguda and Beniadhus but today all of them stand in dilapidated condition which paints a sad story and depicts the reality around the state of tourism in sanctuary. Zero footfalls of real 'tourists' barring seasonal picnickers, nil focus by wildlife and bird photographers and no encouragement to the local town dwellers to visit the sanctuary has kept the beauty of Sunabeda hidden from outside world. With waterfalls, forts, grasslands and religious places all across the plateau, Sunabeda beckons visitors.

Relocation:

Contrary to our expectation and mood prevailing in some of the other Tiger reserves like Satkosia, most of the villagers that we interacted were pro relocation if proper financial package and other livelihood support is provided by the Forest department and district administration. Already some of the villages in Sunabeda gram panchayat had agreed through written commitment to relocate out of the sanctuary area which was never implemented. Department may well keep that in mind and start building the communication around this. Needless to say, the relocation, if at all reinitiated should be accompanied with following of SOPs set by NTCA. That will be a great opportunity for Forest department to showcase empathy and real intention of helping out villagers and should not be seen as a step towards duping the innocent villagers. A right opportunity to shut the mouth of some of the NGOs that had falsely published reports which stated that villagers have been wrongly lured into signing documents favoring the relocation initiatives.

This is a very sensitive issue as always in conservation canvas and hence should be appropriately handled without further damaging the image of department. Without the consent of villagers, any action towards relocation will backfire for sure in Sunabeda and will be more detrimental for its conservation.

Awareness in towns like Khariar and Nuapada

During multiple visits to towns like Khariar & Nuapada and taking a cue out of hundreds of conversations that we had with people of these towns and adjoining villages, it is generally pulsed that awareness on importance of Sunabeda as well as presence of tigers in the region is very negligible. The sense of having pride in this great natural heritage is not present or limited to few people unlike what you get to see in towns like Baripada, Jashipur, Karanjia when it comes to talking about Similipal in Mayurbhanj district. Until and unless city dwellers don't get to see importance of this proposed tiger reserve, it's futile to expect only villagers to work towards conserving Sunabeda. There has been absolute lack of awareness programmes in the whole region. College and school students can be great torch bearers in this regard and contests, exhibitions, debate and painting competitions can be used as great levers in creating a support for Sunabeda. Some of the walls on the main street of Khariar and Nuapada can be painted with different tiger

conservation themes so that positive talk on importance of tigers in saving environment can be initiated. The people have to be part of this game if at all, we need to create a safe Sunabeda.

Illegal encroachments

Under the pretext of FRA, there have been multiple cases in the Sunabeda-Khariar area where forests have been cleared gradually with a purpose of getting land rights eventually. Girdling over large patches have been observed. During one of the recent visits we came across such activity near Buipani area in Khariar forest division. A large patch of thick forest, right beside the forest road has been cleared and for some reason, nobody seems concerned, leave aside taking any action. Until and unless, we exemplify punishments in such cases, illegal encroachments will keep on happening. Satellite imagery over last decade needs to be checked and such cases need to be tracked or else forests of Sunabeda-Khariar will be a freebie for some of local villagers. This is just one of the cases* which came to our observation and there are many that can be listed.



Illegal clearing of forest near Buipani

*an observation and we have not duly investigated the reason though.

A special note on avifauna

Forest Owlet: In February 1877, Valentine Ball had collected the specimen of Forest Owlet (*Athene blewitti*) on the banks of River Udanti towards the southern boundary of Sunabeda sanctuary. This fact should have been a great motivator for the foresters and officers in the region to look out for this species which till recently was thought to be extinct from India until its reappearance in Satpuda region in 1997. Our search for this species continues and we are very much hopeful that one day, the elusive Forest Owlet reappears in the last remaining Teak patches in the forests of Khariar. Teak patches are favored by the Forest owl. If that happens, that would be the biggest boost for the region including the cause of tiger.

About other important species

The region also is one of the best places in Odisha to see Red collared Doves, Bonellis Eagle, and Common Babblers which is not very common in Odisha barring few records. We also have recorded a plethora of species that supports the fact that Sunabeda forests are an abode to a wide range of avifauna diversity. Some of the species we have been able to document include Indian Pitta, Banded bay Cuckoo, Indian Paradise Flycatchers, Jungle Owlet, Tickell's Flycatcher, Sulphur bellied warbler etc. Based on historical records, our search for Chestnut bellied Sandgrouse and Indian Courser continues which are no more found in Odisha.

Valentine Ball's Sunabeda

As described in the book **Jungle Life in India** (Page 581) **1876-77**

As it cleared up on the second day, I made an afternoon march of eight miles to Sambasinghi, in Karial, and dismissed the chuprasies, constables, and shikaris, who had accompanied my camp through Patna. I was here met by a Darogah and Tehsildar of the Karial Raja; and their very civil reception augured well for my comfort while in this native state. The next day I made a short march to Tarnot, a village situated below the north-east corner of an extensive plateau, which, from its configuration as represented on the map, and as seen from the distant glimpses I had of it, would, I felt confident, prove to be of considerable interest geologically. The event fully justified this confidence. Two months spent in rapidly traversing wide areas in which, with unimportant exceptions, metamorphic rocks had alone been met with, made me hail with delight a new formation, regarding the limits and character of which nothing was known. But it is necessary, perhaps, for one to be a geologist in order to fully realize how such a discovery can afford pleasure. Soon after my arrival at Tarnot, I set out to examine a scarped face of rock, which from below looked so easy to scramble up that I was tempted to ascend it. Having, with assistance, accomplished the first fifteen feet or so, which was a nearly perpendicular face of rock, I found that the further ascent was a much more formidable affair than I had expected, but as I could not get down again, I resolved to attempt to reach the crest of the hill, some 150 feet above. How I managed it I hardly know. In one place my whole weight was supported from a small fig-tree growing in the crevices, and while drawing myself up by means of it, my right arm was strained, and had it not



been for a hollowed space below the crest, into which I crept and remained until somewhat rested, I believe I should have fallen through sheer exhaustion. The natives accompanying me were of course better able to make their way over the steep face than I was, but the mental and physical strain seemed to have told upon them also in no small degree. Arrived at the crest we found the slope on the other side covered with fallen blocks and jungle, and offering no serious obstacles to the descent. The next day, leaving my tent and camp behind me, I took a small sleeping-tent and such articles as were necessary for a three days' absence to Maragura, a village rather difficult of access, from being surrounded on all sides by hills, but conveniently situated as regards the plateau, which I proposed to ascend and examine. The locality of Maragura is, I believe, otherwise called Manickgurh. I found here a fine tank with the remains of an old temple. The present village is a miserable collection of huts, but some of the men were fine sturdy fellows, though of what race I find I have omitted to record. Having pitched my tent on a suitable spot on the embankment of the tank, I shot a couple of teal, and then proceeded to retrieve them, and at the same time refresh myself with a bath. As the birds had fallen among weeds, where the water was out of my depth, I had an opportunity of realising how unpleasant must be the position of those who sometimes are sent in to fetch out birds. Not that I was in any real danger, but the feeling caused by the long stems twining about one is not agreeable, more particularly when, as in the present case, some of those stems happen to be covered with thorns. In the afternoon I went out to examine the bed of the Jonk or Jong river where it debouches from the hills. It contains an enormous accumulation of quartzite boulders under and through which the water makes its way. But occasionally there are deep pools containing water of an opaline sea-green colour, which is a common appearance in the water flowing from this plateau. It has also been noticed as characterizing the water flowing from rocks of similar age which are found far away to the south in the Madras Presidency. At one point on the banks there was pointed out to me a huge iron spear, about six feet long, with a spirally ornamented shaft 2 to 3 inches in diameter. It must have taken a giant to wield it. Although stuck up in the ground, quite unprotected, it shews no sign of rust. It is called Bhim-er-/af, or the mace of Shiv, and is an object of adoration, and is noteworthy simply as a piece of native metal-work. On the following morning I started to explore the plateau. The path at first led up the valley of the Jonk for about a mile, after which we commenced the ascent over the edges of horizontal beds of quartzite belonging to the Vindhyan series. A walk of about four or five miles brought us to an ancient fort called Jumlagor, which is situated at the head of a picturesque waterfall about three hundred feet high. The view from this point, including deep-cut gorges with the scarped and terraced edges of the plateau rising one above the other and crowned here and there by isolated peaks, made up a scene of great beauty, and one shewing very characteristically the manner in which the rocks of this formation are usually affected by sub-aerial denudation. A second waterfall higher up I was unable to visit owing to the badness of the weather, a heavy thunderstorm appearing to be imminent. The old fort must have been a formidable affair in its day, and was probably used as a place of retreat when there were disturbances in the plains below. The walls were built of stone, but bricks had also been employed in its construction. With the exception of the walls, which enclose perhaps about half an acre, I saw no traces of any buildings. Both here and on the ascent we startled several sambar from their lairs. The plateau must be full of them, judging from the numbers I heard belling in the evening. Near the head of the fall too, I saw very fresh tracks of a tiger, which must have been roaming about there shortly before our arrival. From the people, and even

from the Raja afterwards, I could learn nothing definite about these remains ; in fact I found it difficult to get reliable information in these native states, in reference to simple enquiries about the present state of the country.

The next day I returned to my camp at Tarnot by a circuitous route, which brought me over some very rough ground on the outer slopes of the plateau. In many places I found remains of old fortifications now enveloped in heavy jungle. On arrival at camp.....

Concluding note and appeal

As mentioned earlier, Sunabeda holds the potential of being a vibrant tiger habitat in dry deciduous forest biome of Odisha, where we do not have intense tiger conservation. More, if assiduously conserved, it would soon pay rich dividends by acting as a sink habitat, provide the habitat connectivity from Chhattisgarh to Mahanadian biome facilitating immigration of tigers from surplus breeding habitats further west. This, in turn, shall be the natural and low cost alternative to forced, high cost tiger relocation programme from Central India, whose success, as we have seen, depends largely on positive people- tiger interface. Once, well protected, ecotourism will get a big boost and this will be one way for locals to get engaged and earn livelihoods. It will cater to ecotourists from western Odisha and Raipur, Bhilai of Chhattisgarh. For this to happen, we would urge the State Government to take following actions :

- i) **Immediately Notify Sunabeda as a Tiger Reserve, which has been pending since long after in-principle approval has been communicated by the NTCA.**
- ii) Take up the matter with Home Department to sanitise the area from Naxalites.
- iii) Create an enabling environment for forest staff to return to their positions for any meaningful work.
- iv) Ground massive awareness campaign in enclosed and fringe villages and towns of Khariar and Nuapada with people as stakeholders.
- v) Forest and wildlife staff needs to be provided with required amenities including free ration, prophylactic/ preventive medicines, support auxiliary staff and a vehicle in each Range.
- vi) Monitoring wild animals should start earnestly after staff positioning so that it becomes ingrained in routine work.
- vii) Implement the management plan in a participatory mode with the EDC/ VSS.
- viii) Work out, initiate and implement a model voluntary relocation plan in a way that, it shall have a spread effect.
- ix) Issue a direction to prevent migratory livestock entering the area.
- x) Wildlife wing in collaboration with District Collector to facilitate income generating activities for villagers to create conducive wildlife- people interface.

Sunabeda – Once A Bastion For Wildlife, Now On The Brink

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Once a bastion for wildlife, now on the brink, says **Satyesh Naik** who makes a case for the ecological resurrection of Odisha's Sunabeda Wildlife Sanctuary.



We drove from the town of Khariar in western Odisha's Nuapada District, once famous for its teak and sightings of the elusive Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti*.

I gazed across at the vista of the Patidongar and Ghodadongar hills that stretched for miles before me. The hills encompass the hidden jewels of Odisha – the forests of Khariar and Sunabeda, spread across 600 sq. km. Rich and biodiverse, a formal notification of the forest as a tiger reserve has been pending for over a decade. The lack of resources is one reason why, in recent years, Maoist insurgency has reared its head.

In the winter of 2017, I contacted Tejraj Patel, a local who agreed to be my guide. Having worked for the land rights of forest dwellers, he was well aware of the forest and its problems. I was, of course, forewarned about Maoist presence in Odisha and Chhattisgarh and discovered that the solitary rest house inside Sunabeda was occupied by paramilitary forces. Tejraj therefore arranged for me to stay at one of the villages in the sanctuary.

The dusty roads wound through the hills and a quick descent took us to Cherchuan, the entry point to the forest. A couple of guards at the gate confessed that it had only been opened a few weeks ago after years. I noticed that the staff wore plain clothes since their khaki uniforms were a dead giveaway for

Maoists. They were clearly taken aback that we wanted to get to Sunabeda, and asked if we were sure about driving towards the plateau.

We were!

We negotiated the steep Ghodadongar Ghat and its multiple, disconcerting hairpin bends, but the ride was well worth the trouble. And the view from the top was breathtaking. We eventually reached Jamgaon, where the former sarpanch, Tulasi Majhi, our host, was waiting for us. His home was my base camp for the next three days.



EXPLORING AND UNDERSTANDING SUNABEDA

In the company of Tulasi and Tejraj, on the first day itself we made our way to the famous waterfalls of Beniadhus and Kharaldhus. There are no less than 12 waterfalls in Sunabeda and they are nothing short of magnificent in the monsoons. The Jonk river, which drains through the northern half of the forests, feeds some of these falls. The Sunabeda forests are typical of a central Indian landscape... but they seemed empty to me. I saw no signs of leopards or tigers... no scats, no alarm calls. As I quietly watched the sun set on the banks of the Jonk, I yearned for the honk of a sambar or the bark of a muntjac. Nothing!

It was cold and evenings were spent around a fire at Tulasi's house, where the villagers would gather to share *mahua* (locally known as *mahuli*), an intoxicating brew distilled from the *Madhuca longifolia* flower. Using hand-made leaf cups, the hospitable villagers spoke of tiger sightings from years gone by. They do still see some leopards around their villages they said, but only very seldom did a tiger transit their forest from next door Udanti-Sitanadi.

Sitting with these simple folk, I learned of the lack of health facilities and their dependence on wholly unreliable medicine men. Also of the malnourishment suffered by children and the apathy of the district

administration. NGOs that had worked here in the past had been of great help, but they moved out under threat from Maoists or perhaps because they ran out of funds. There was marked distrust between the villagers and the Forest Department. Speaking openly, the villagers explained that they understood well the importance of the forests but were skeptical about the proposed tiger reserve and feared displacement. I did engage them and mentioned that there was no plan for relocation of villages but they were firm in their view because there were already obstacles in their path for collecting minor forest produce. A new conservation ethic is badly needed, one where locals actually benefit from enhanced biodiversity in Sunabeda. It's not impossible, but it does require determination and honest efforts to better the lot of villagers in consultation with them.



A LIFETIME OF NEGLECT

The next day, we drove towards Datunama, the last post on the Odisha-Chhattisgarh border, hopeful that we might sight some wildlife. A heavy combing operation by armed forces was underway along the route to the village. The personnel were on foot, reinforcing the fact that driving on four wheelers through these forests can be dangerous. We reached a flat table top, a couple of miles before Datunama and decided to walk along a forest trail. Within a few steps, to our utter delight, we discovered a tiger scat. For the next couple of miles, enroute to Datunama, we came across multiple scats. This patch was possibly frequented by more than one tiger. The last census conducted by the Odisha Forest Department in 2016 estimated the presence of four tigers within the Khariar-Sunabeda forests. At the turn of the century there were around 30, but that figure does not seem to have been realistic.

The region is beset with trouble. In 2010, a Forest Department staff member was brutally murdered and subsequently, no full-fledged tiger census activities have been carried out across the Sunabeda landscape.

I stood at the edge of a grassland, visualising what the scene could be if the forests were secured and protected over the next couple of years. Herds of chital would take over the table tops and bird song would return. But my reverie was short-lived as I saw a huge herd of cattle approaching. And we were in what was to be the core of the proposed tiger reserve! It seems cattle herders from as far as Madhya Pradesh enter inside. I learned that many such herders picked up money for poisoning tiger too.

This was hardly surprising, given the fact that patrolling was literally absent. The forest was an open vault for poachers, woodcutters and cattle grazers.

We arrived at Datunama, a hamlet occupied by few *Paharia* tribal families. They weave baskets and other bamboo products and move between different areas of the forest in search of suitable bamboo availability. The forest beat office was empty. Most of the forest posts in Sunabeda presented a similar scenario – broken, ruined or blown up. It was depressing to see the state of the Forest Department's infrastructure. In many ways, it was representative of their shattered morale. The work of forest staff is now limited to peripheral activity such as road repair and weed clearing. Apart from a few symbolic conservation efforts, little is being done. Clearly community-based conservation work could make a world of difference, but nothing has been attempted. It is as if both people and the wilderness are caught in a time warp.

Maneuvering the vehicle through the unrepaired forest road beyond Datunama was tough, and so we decided to walk across the border into Chhattisgarh. A group of villagers we met on the path mentioned tiger sightings. Earlier I had seen signs of nilgai. The forests of Khariar and Sunabeda are possibly the only areas in Odisha with a sizeable nilgai population and with strong protection measures the habitat can indeed be nurtured back to health so it is capable of supporting tigers.

I returned to Jamgaon with mixed feelings. I felt empty inside as if something was slipping out of our hands gradually and unceremoniously.

On our final day, we left before dawn to try our luck birding in some of the deeper forest pockets of Jamgaon. The dried leaves on the forest floor were wet with dew. And in the silence of dawn, I could still hear the sound of dew drops falling on the forest floor. In the distance I heard the plaintive call of a Serpent-eagle, only to discover that I had been fooled by a Greater Racket-tailed Drongo mimicking the raptor. A group of Banded Bay Cuckoos chased each other above the canopy, while Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers and a couple of Indian Nuthatches were busy plucking insects from tree barks. A flock of Yellow-footed Green Pigeons took off, only to be replaced by a lone Malabar Pied Hornbill. To my delight, Tulasi spotted leopard pugmarks. At a nearby waterhole, barking deer hoof prints confirmed their presence. My hopes soared.

Sunabeda could still be saved.

PHOTO DOCUMENTATION DONE BY
THE CORRIDOR FOUNDATION
BETWEEN 2017-19 IN
SUNABEDA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY &
KHARIAR FORESTS

Some of the glimpses of the colourful Sunabeda



Asian brown flycatcher at Komana



Yellow eyed Babbler at Jamgaon



Common Babbler at Tikhali



Blue-throat at Tikhali



Banded bay cuckoo at Cherchuan



Black-naped Monarch at Cherchuan



White rumped Shama at Cherchuan



Common Woodshrike at Beniadhus



Indian pitta at Cherchuan



Tickell's blue flycatcher at Cherchuan



Indian paradise flycatcher at Cherchuan



Indian paradise flycatcher at Cherchuan



Black rumped Flameback at Chuipani



Common hawk Cuckoo at Kermeli



Common Kestrel at Cherchuan



White rumped Munia at Kermeli



Brown capped pygmy Woodpecker



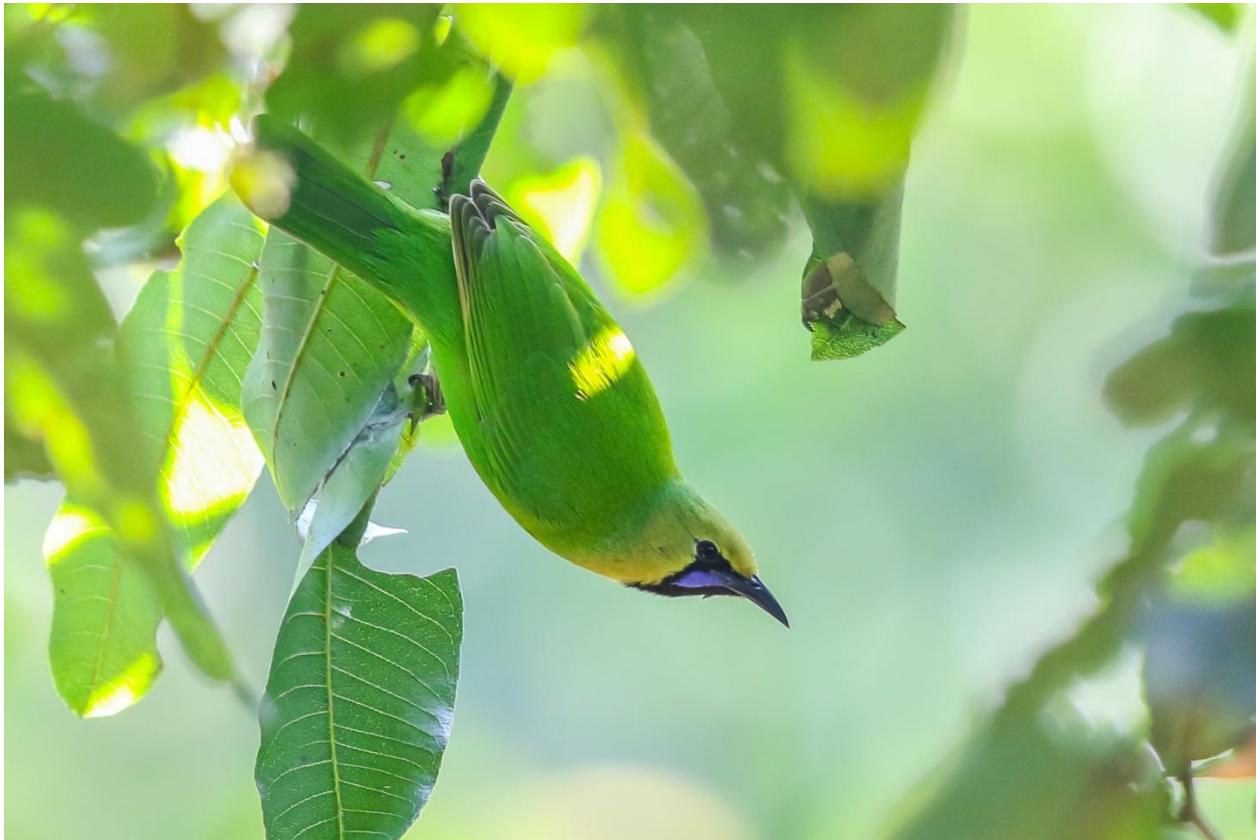
Verditer Flycatcher at Maraguda



White bellied Drongo at Jamgaon



Mottled wood Owl at Kermeli



Jerdon's leafbird at Chuipani



Jungle Owlet at Jamgaon



Indian Nuthatch at Kermeli



Green warbler at Chuipani



Coppersmith Barbet at Dharambandh



Blue capped rockthrush



Red collared Doves in Khariar (top) and Sinapalli (bottom)



Oriental white eye (top) and Common lora (bottom) at Komana



Alexandrine Parakeet at Jamgaon



Crested Serpent Eagle at Kholibhitar



Ultramarine flycatcher at Kermeli



Scaly breasted Munia at Kermeli



Tickell's blue flycatcher at Haluapali



Blue tiger at Maraguda



Commander at Chuipani



Common Jezebel at Chuipani



Common Pierrot at Maraguda



Common Baron at Chuipani



Striped Tiger at Beniadhus



Abrus precatorius at Dharambandha



Diplocyclos palmatus at Dharambandha



Eranthemum nervosum at Buipani



Mallotus philippinensis at Kapatdhar



Petalidium barlerioides at Sunabeda



Woodfordia fruticosa at Rupiam



Grewia asiatica at Patadhara



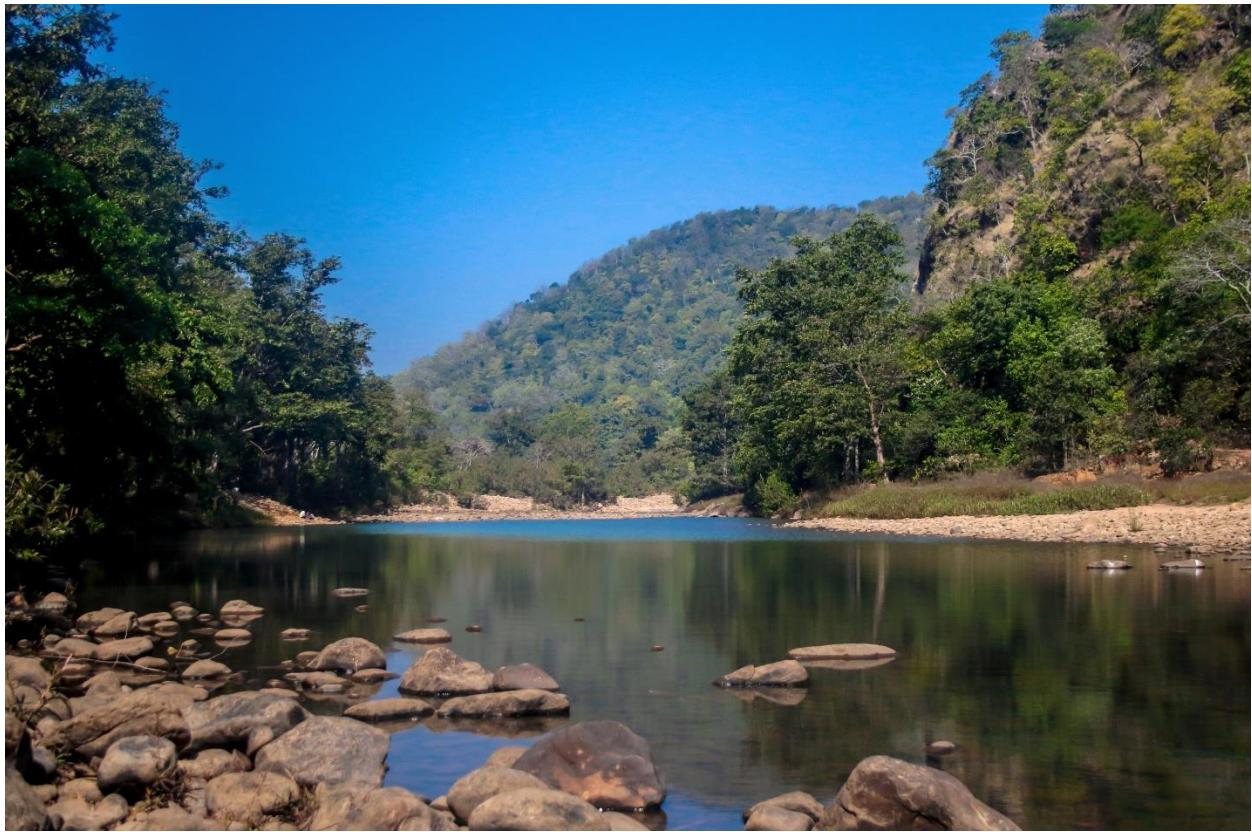
Gardenia gummifera at Rupiam



Dicliptera chinensis @ Cherachuan



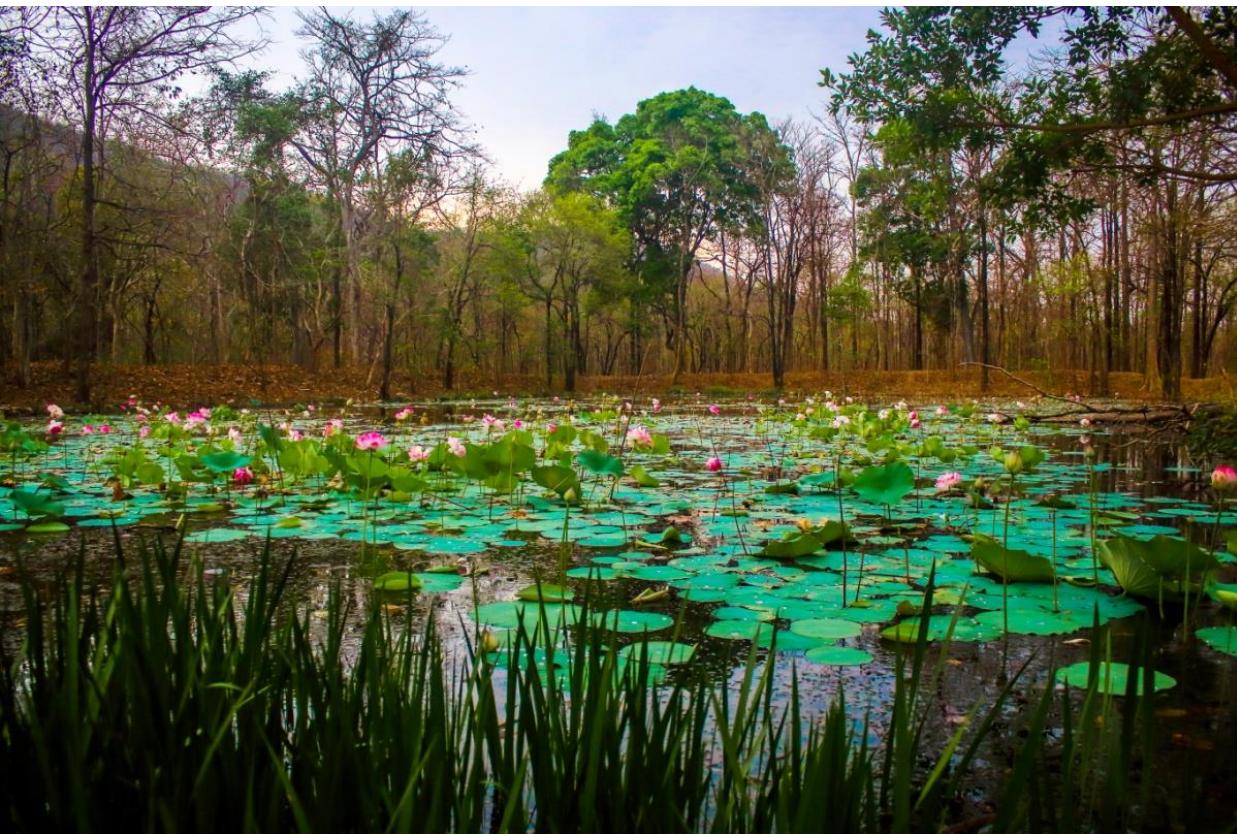
Terminalia chebula at Kermeli



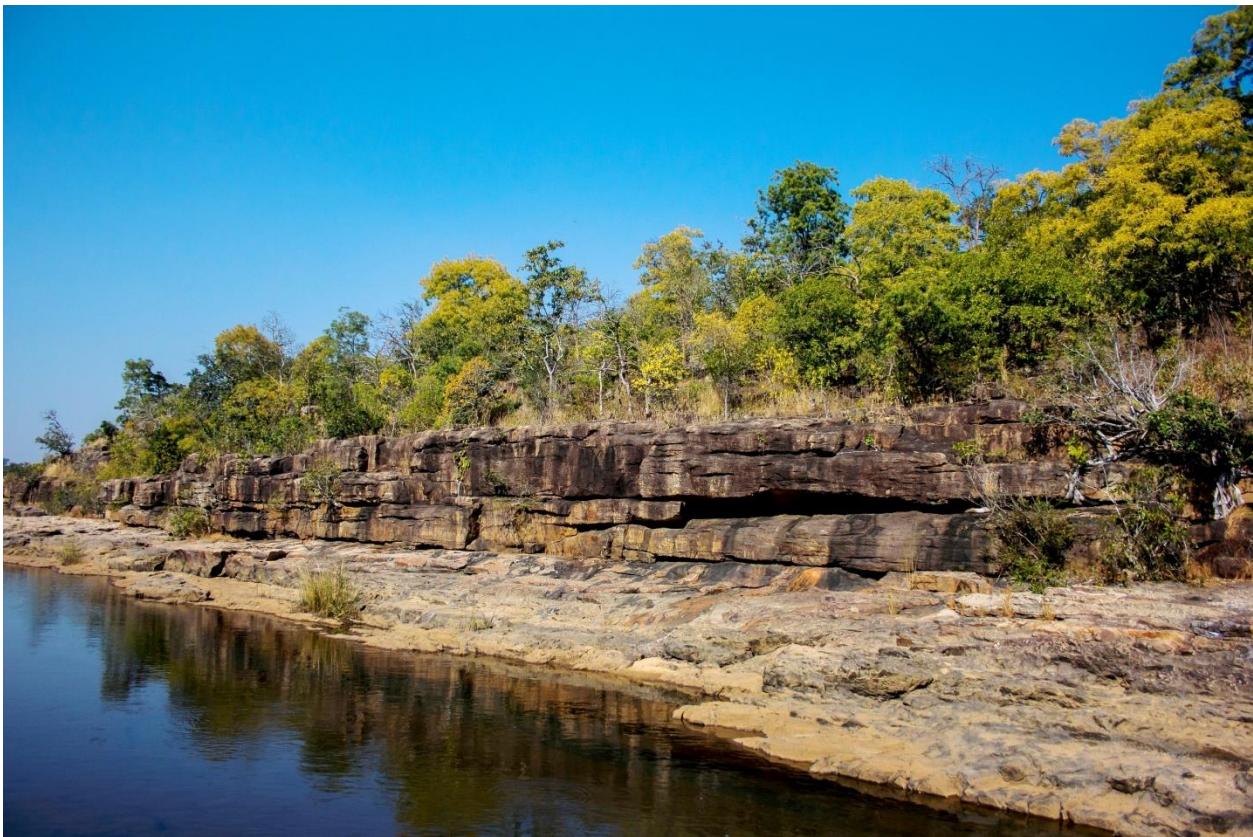
Ghodanala at picturesque Kapatdhar



Beniadhus waterfalls



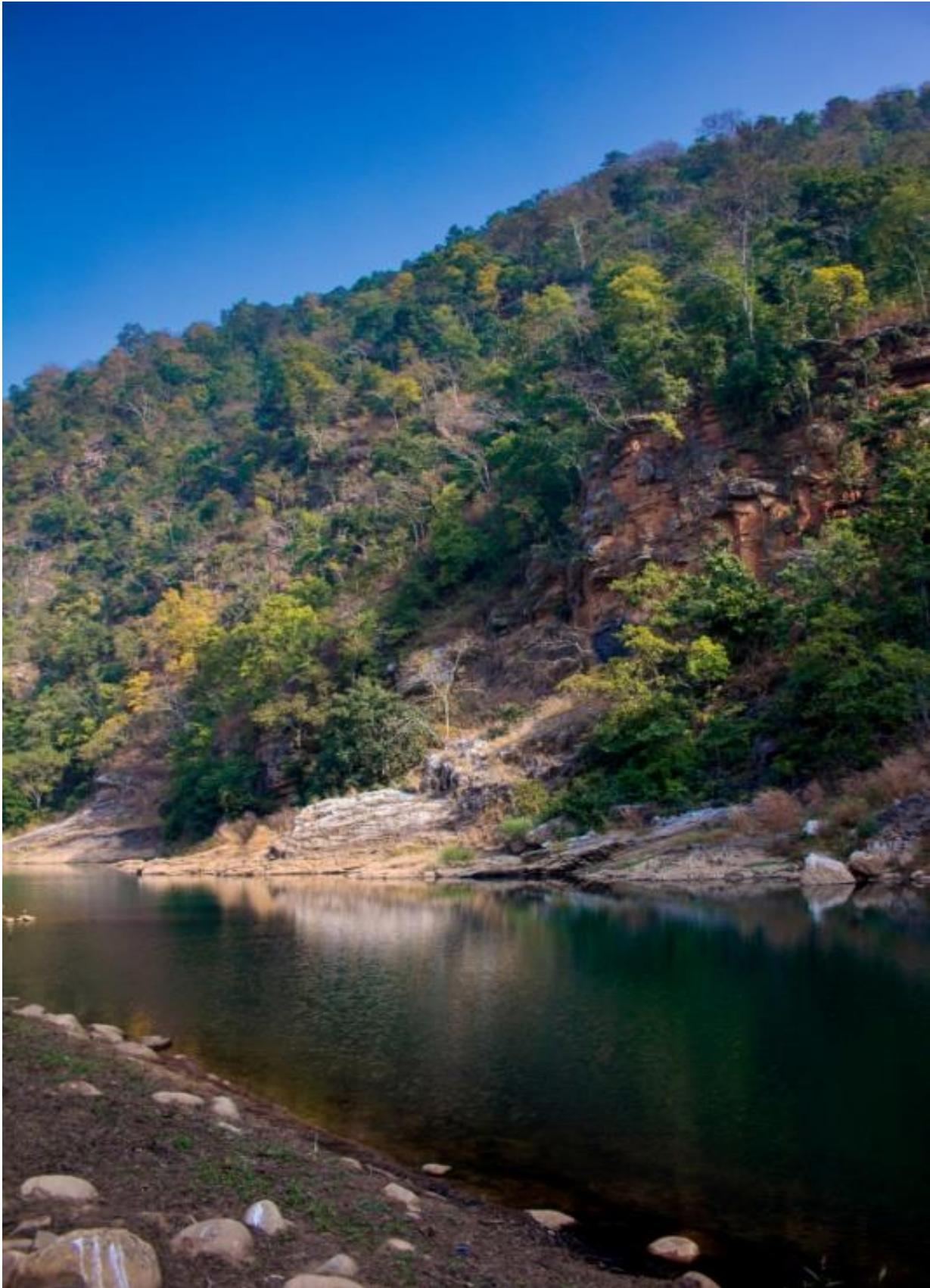
A beautiful waterhole at Cherchuan



River Jonk: the lifeline of Sunabeda



Beautiful Jamgaon valley in winter mornings



Kapatdhar

ACTIVITIES TAKEN UP BY VOLUNTEERS OF THE CORRIDOR FOUNDATION



Awareness Programs in various schools

Free saplings distribution & plantation drive of fruiting trees



Fire prevention/dousing/awareness





Founded by Satyesh Naik, (wildlife writer and conservationist from Odisha) in 2017, **The Corridor Foundation** is a volunteering group which is working to safeguard Sunabeda and creating awareness. It is a self funded group where volunteers are contributing out of their own savings to create awareness about the most important tigerscape of Odisha.



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